

Frameworks for learning in the first years of school.

Sue Dockett
Faculty of Education,
University of Western Sydney, Macarthur.

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Abstract

This paper considers play as a framework for learning in the first years of school. Issues explored include how play is defined; play as a social and cultural context for learning; intersubjectivity within play; and role for teachers in promoting learning through play. Transcripts of play are used to illustrate these issues.

Introduction

Play and the early years of school

Within NSW, there have been some moves to recognise the importance of play in the early years of school. For example, the document Kindergarten - The first year of school (NSW Department of Education 1986) promotes a play-based approach and the Board of Studies documents, Some guiding principles for primary education (Board of Studies, NSW 1996) and The importance of play (Dockett & Lambert 1995a) emphasise the importance of play in the provision of educational experiences for children not only in the early years, but throughout childhood. Underlying these documents is the view that play is not only a valuable experience in itself, but also a potentially powerful medium for learning (Dockett & Perry 1996).

Defining play

Most of us can observe some action, or even engage in some actions, and realise that what is occurring is play. However, there are several actual definitions of play. Many of these list a number of characteristics which, when combined, contribute to the disposition of play. One example of this sort of definition comes from Rogers and Sawyers (1988, p.1), who define play as being:

- intrinsically motivated;

- relatively free of externally imposed rules;
- carried out as if the activity were for real;
- focused on the process rather than the product;
- dominated by the players;
- based on the active involvement of the players.

On their own, each of these characteristics is typical of a range of experiences. However, in combination, each makes an important contribution to the phenomenon of play.

Other researchers have defined play in different ways. Of particular interest to me in defining play are the characteristics outlined by Sponseller (1982), who described play as a process which has internal

control, internal reality and internal motivation. These features form a loose definition of play, allowing the focus to be on the process of the experience, the level of control exerted by those involved and the intention of the players, rather than the actions or outcomes.

This definition is appealing in that it emphasises that play has a mental component (Dockett 1996). This is particularly obvious in some forms of play, such as pretend play, where children make implicit and/or explicit reference to mental representation. If we are going to focus on play and learning, then it is this mental component that has the potential to provide a range of information.

Play and learning

Early childhood educators have long emphasised the value and importance of play for young children. Part of this derives from the Vygotskian position that play is a leading source of both cognitive and affective development and from the Piagetian position that play is both a driving force for development as well as a mirror for development that has already occurred (Rusher, Cross & Ware, 1995).

In other words, play has the potential to promote cognitive development in at least two ways: through generating a sense of cognitive conflict as children encounter views and ideas which conflict with their own understandings—a Piagetian perspective—and through the construction of understandings that come from interacting in a social situation—a Vygotskian perspective—(Dockett 1995). Piaget (1965) stressed the importance of children interacting and co-operating with peers as a means of becoming aware of different perspectives, adopting roles and creating and resolving cognitive conflicts. The Vygotskian (1978) view has focused more on the value of social interaction with more skilled members of a social group. When children interact with more skilled or experienced members of the group, who guide and support the experience, they are likely to interact in a more complex way and to achieve higher levels of understanding than they would on their own.

Play as a social and cultural context

Recently, there have been moves to focus more on the social and cultural context of play. This research has sought to understand the processes children use in play and to interpret these within the specific context in which they occurred. In this way, researchers aim to understand the locally constructed meanings and common expectations that underlie play interactions (Kantor, Elgas & Fernie 1993).

Underlying this perspective is the view that not all children in all cultural and social contexts play in ways we expect or understand. As one example, Gaskins and Göncü (1992) describe the play of Mayan children, noting that "play represents something fundamentally different for the Mayan child than it does for the American child. Mayan play themes are exclusively about adult activities ... [and] ... there is little elaboration or introduction of variation or complexity during the course of the play" (p. 32).

Göncü (1995) has elaborated upon this theme, noting that we tend to assume that the play of Western middle-class children is the "norm" and use it as the comparison for other groups. This results in a deficit view towards those groups who do not demonstrate similar types of play.

To avoid some of the perils of the deficit view, there have been calls for comparisons to be made within groups, rather than across groups and for a greater emphasis on observing play and developing categories for that play from what we see, rather than categorising children's play according to predetermined categories (Göncü & Tuermer 1995).

Play and intersubjectivity

In focussing on the social and cultural context of play, there is a growing awareness of the value of interaction with more skilled members of a social group (Dockett 1996). Regardless of whether or not these interactions involve adults or peers, they have the potential to enhance learning, if they are located within the zone of proximal development and if they are underpinned by intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity is described by Cannella (1993, p. 429) as "the process of constructing and reconstructing joint purposes between the child and his/her interacting partner". What does this mean? For Cannella, this involves a number of steps:

- each individual comes to situation with own perspective
- common reference points are made (eg agree on particular task/direction) through communication, which is mediated by one or both partners
- each partner adapts to the other
- during the interaction, partners share purpose and meaning that neither would have created alone.

Through these steps, children develop what Göncü (1993, p.99) describes

as a "joint understanding between players". Rather than describing various stages of play, it is the development of intersubjectivity that characterises the play of young children according to this view.

Göncü (1993) argues that both Piagetian and Vygotskian theories of play are based on the development of intersubjectivity. In his early work, Piaget (1945) argued that play was based on collective and standardised play symbols, such as language, and Vygotsky (1978) argued also that rules underpinned the social interactions of play. Both theorists also indicated that play became increasingly social at about the age of three years and both attributed important roles in the development of understanding to negotiations, albeit for different reasons.

In his investigations, Göncü (1993) has described the increasingly intersubjective nature of children's play, as evident in their dialogue during play and in their ability to expand the play interaction by contributing new ideas or materials at appropriate times, expressing agreement and emphasising their own ideas. Older children were described as extending play by building onto or adding new dimensions to the play. One of the important considerations here is the awareness children must have of others to be able to do this successfully. In order to build upon a play theme, children need to have an understanding of what is happening in the play, about what roles are being played and the relevance of these as well as an awareness of what is likely to be accepted by the other players. In other words, they need to have an awareness of what the others are thinking and are likely to do next. In this respect, developing intersubjectivity, that is, developing a shared focus of interaction, and an increasing awareness of mental representations have much in common (Dockett, 1994).

Negotiation

The process within social interactions which promote learning, as described by Cannella (1993) rests on the processes of negotiation and shared experience during an interaction. Negotiation needs only to occur when there is a conflict or when participants do not agree. There are numerous instances when this occurs with children's play. When children do negotiate, they use a variety of strategies with varying effect. At one extreme, young children may attempt to resolve a conflict or disagreement by using actions such as hitting or biting

(Selman & Schultz 1990). Such efforts show no awareness of the perspectives of others and no awareness of the process of negotiating. As children grow and develop, they become more aware that others have perspectives that differ from their own and more adept at taking these into consideration as they attempt to resolve disagreements through negotiation. The following transcript provides an example of this.

The fence

Blair and Malcolm are sitting on the carpet using the Lego Farm set. They both have fence pieces and, starting at different ends of the mat, are constructing the one fence.

Blair:I'm making a big farm.

Malcolm:Blair, I think that's the wrong way.

[Blair has fence pieces upside down]

I'll show ya, they s'posed to go on this.

[demonstrates the correct position]

Blair:No, I know how to do it.

Malcolm:Yeah, but you don't have to have 'em like that.

[points to Blair's fence]

Blair:Yes you do.

Malcolm:No, you have to have 'em like that.

[points to his part of the fence]

Blair:No you don't.

Malcolm:You do.

Blair:How do you know? How do you know?

Malcolm:Because my Mummy telled me when I came here, when I just started.

Blair:Did she?

Malcolm:She did.

Blair:[continues constructing his fence with pieces upside down]

Malcolm:OK, you can do it like that, but you'll see it's the wrong way.

[turns head upside down to show that the fence is upside down]

Blair:Well, I still won't do it.

[both build in silence for a few minutes]

Malcolm:Can I help ya?

Blair:Yeah, gonna be a big one [fence]

Malcolm:It's all right.

You do it how you do it, and I will do it how I do it, OK? OK?

Do you want it to be like that?

[Looks at the one fence that is half one way and half the other]

Blair:Yeah, an' we doing a lot, an' it's big!

Malcolm:Now, make it turn in now.

[fence is formed into a rectangle]

Blair:Ours is gonna have lotts animals in there.

Malcolm:[looks at fence --where both sections meet, they don't match]

Can I straighten it please?

Blair:Yeah, OK. Wait a minute.

Malcolm:We haven't got any more fence. We need some more.

[as adds more fence, turns all pieces the same way]

Blair:Only one sheep can go in here, and two.

Gonna have lotts animals.

(Dockett 1994)

In this example, a range of negotiation strategies is employed by Blair and Malcolm. As they discuss the correct way to position the Lego pieces to make the fence, strategies such as gentle suggestion,

demonstration, referring to parental knowledge, looking at the fence upside down to stress that the pieces are upside down, offers of assistance, acceptance of different views, and specific requests are all used. Resolution is finally reached through Malcolm's persistence.

Negotiations can become quite complex as children balance an awareness of what they want as well as what the other players want; some predictions about how the other players will react to suggestions made; and what others will accept as a reasonable argument.

Shared experience

The second aspect of social interactions which promote intersubjectivity is shared experience, which is defined as "the creation of a connection between interacting partners" (Cannella 1993, p. 431). Much of young children's play is characterised by solitary or parallel actions. In these, children do not establish any connection; rather they are independently focussed.

Shared experiences with peers become more common as children grow and develop and as they become more able to communicate with others. These experiences can vary in their complexity, ranging from the simple imitation of actions to a more complex display of empathy or mutual support (Cannella 1993). While more complex interactions may demonstrate a greater understanding of people and experiences, this should not be taken to mean that young children are not capable of establishing shared experiences.

The experiences most likely to promote learning, according to Cannella (1993), are "exchanges in which peers feel comfortable expressing differing ideas and working to collaboratively solve problems ... These factors appear to describe a construction of shared meaning, a joint purpose and connection" (p. 442). In other words, interactions which support the creation of intersubjectivity.

Within play, there is the potential for shared experiences to develop among children, and from this, there is the potential for "young children [to] construct shared meaning ... from the shared knowledge about everyday activities they bring to the play setting and by responding to, and building on, their partner's ideas and actions as the play unfolds" (Farver 1992, p. 501).

The first transcript below offers an example of play that involves the connection between the interacting partners and which is likely to result in the development of intersubjectivity among players. This is contrasted with another transcript of the same play experience, involving different children and where there seems to be little connection.

Pizza play 1

Lisa:I'm gonna make pizza now. Pizza for my Mum.
[picks up phone, receiver to ear, hangs up]
That was my Mum. She said she wants pizza.
Stella:[walks to table, notepad and pencil in hand]
What do you want?
Julie:[seated at table] Garlic bread. Um, an pizza.
Stella:Well, we've run out of pizza.
Dale:Ring, ring. Ring, ring.
Stella:[picks up phone] OK, one minute, OK. [hangs up]
Julie:Where's our pizza?
Jena:[sits near Julie] I'll have a cheese one.
Julie:[nods] Yeah, cheese.
Jena:We're both having cheese.
Julie:With pineapple!
Dale:[sits at table] I want pepperoni.

Stella:[delivers a tray of play dough to the table]
Julie:I think it's your pizza. [passes it to Dale] Where's our pizza?
Jena:I'm gonna ask where our pizza is. [walks to dough table,
approaches Robert] Where's our pizza?
Robert:at table rolling out dough] It's gone.
Jena:[returns to table] I think they forget about us.
Robert:[to table with tray of dough]
Jena:Here's our pizza! Gotta cut it into pieces. [picks up cutter]
Now I gonna be the pizza man, an I get all the pizza.

(Dockett 1995)

Pizza play 2

John and Jason have been using dough for five minutes.

John:[piles up dough] Isn't that 'normous! [laughs]
[hits dough with cutter] Can't cut it.
Jason:Now I gotta cut it up. ReeEEEEEEEErrrrrrrrrrrr [cutting sound]
Neeeeeeehhhhhhhhhh [cutting sound as holds pizza cutter on
its side and pushes it through pile of dough]
John:[looks up, holds cutter in same way, also makes cutting sound]
Jason:[very loud cutting sounds] I cutted mine away with my saw.
John:Watch out for my chain saw. Look, got sharp points on it.
[Holds up cutter, spins it around]
Jason:Gimme that one! I want it!
John:No. Hey! [calls to adult] He's hitting!

The play finishes as the two boys run off, one chasing the other with a pizza cutter, making loud chainsaw noises.
(Dockett 1993)

In the second of these transcripts there is some indication of shared experiences, as John imitates the actions of Jason. However, this play is not characterised by a the building of intersubjectivity through responding to and building on the ideas contributed by each player.

The second transcript also serves to illustrate an important point about the learning potential of play. That is, that all play does not necessarily result in learning, just as all social interaction does not result in the development of intersubjectivity.

Teacher roles in promoting play

Drawing on an understanding of the potential for the development of intersubjectivity among peers, teachers can promote play when they have active roles in:

- managing play

Teachers need to provide the space, time and equipment for play Jones and Reynolds (1992). Without a suitable physical environment, play is unlikely to become complex and detailed. For example, children are unlikely to embark on a intricate play theme if they know that they only have five minutes in which to play. Complex play takes time to develop, as children negotiate and plan the actions and roles that will be included. Being a stage manager involves ensuring that adequate time is provided for play, and that there is sufficient space and

equipment to promote complex, sustained play.

- complicating play

Teachers may also act to extend or complicate the play. This may be done in a number of ways, including asking relevant and related questions about the play and the characters within it, or making suggestions as to how the play might proceed (Dockett 1995).

- representing play

Teachers can actively promote the representation of play, through the use of stories, drawings, photographs or diagrams. These representations can be used as the trigger for future play or in discussions with children about the nature and direction of the play. For example, teachers may act as a scribe, writing down the story or plot that has been enacted, or where the story has developed and where it should commence next time. Jones and Reynolds (1992, p. 59) provide

an example of a teacher's recording of the block construction the children had made, with appropriate captions dictated by the children, and the sequence of actions that led to the final building. Such representations may be shared with children at a later date, or use them as a starting point for reports and discussions of the play.

- modelling negotiation skills

Sometimes, adults will need to help children resolve conflicts or negotiate solutions to problems. Adults are important models for children and the strategies they use often will be adopted by children.

- using praise appropriately

Adults need to ensure that they use praise in a sincere and appropriate manner. Rather than empty praise, adults need to consider how they can use praise to recognise the efforts of children and to encourage them in more complex interactions and play.

Conclusion

The focus on the social and cultural context of play is part of a revised interest in children's play and in the potential for learning within that. Such an approach recognises that realising such potential depends largely on the interactions which occur and the understandings that are attached to these. As children demonstrate a willingness and a desire to interact with others and as they start to recognise that they each bring different perspectives to the play situation, the starting points of the development of intersubjectivity are laid. As children establish common reference points through the use of a range of communication strategies and as they become engaged in a process of adaptation to each other, they are well on the way to developing shared purposes, and possibly even shared meanings that they would not have been able to create on their own. Teachers can actively support this process by considering the ways in which they provide resources such as time, space and materials, and by reflecting upon the interactive strategies they use.

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Faculty of Education,
University of Western Sydney, Macarthur.

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